

ENGLISH LITERATURE AND COMPOSITION

SECTION II

Total Time—2 hours

Question 1

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

Read the following poem carefully, paying particular attention to the physical intensity of the language. Then write a well-organized essay in which you explain how the poet conveys not just a literal description of picking blackberries but a deeper understanding of the whole experience. You may wish to include analysis of such elements as diction, imagery, metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, and form.

Blackberry-Picking

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| <p>Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
<i>Line</i> Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
<i>(5)</i> You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots
<i>(10)</i> Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills¹
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
<i>(15)</i> Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.²</p> | <p>We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.³
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
<i>(20)</i> The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.</p> |
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¹ Planted rows

² Bluebeard is a character in a fairy tale who murders his wives

³ Barn

—Seamus Heaney

"Blackberry-Picking" from, SELECTED POEMS
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“A Childish Experience Turned Mature”

In “Blackberry-Picking”, Seamus Heaney writes about his experience with picking blackberries with his group. Instead of a fun experience for kids, Heaney writes that the picking is very tiring and the results are not good as expected. This contrasts from a fun experience for children because blackberries are usually easy to pick without mess and the blackberries taste good, unlike Heaney’s experience. This poem is actually a metaphor of a person’s life and the person’s feeling about their life—how children are excited about being adults but, when they do become adults, have a much harder time than they expected. Instead of simply writing about the experience, Heaney goes in depth of what he gets out of the experience and a person’s life and emotions by using metaphors, similes, imageries, and form.

Heaney uses metaphors and similes to dig deep into the experience. The poem’s setting is an implied metaphor. In the first line, he says that he goes to pick berries in “[l]ate August.” This time of the year is the third season of the year, fall. Heaney uses fall to establish a person’s life era, which is pubescent age. He describes the juice of the blackberries as “thicken wine: summer’s blood” (6). In this quote, he is not literally referring to the actual blood of summer (in fact, this such blood does not exist), but he compares what his friends think of from eating and tasting the blackberries, especially the juice, to summer memories and feelings, even though the time is fall season. Summer, the second season of the year, is another metaphor that implies a person’s childhood age. Thus, when the person, who is metaphorically pubescent, eats the blackberry, they get their childhood memory. Because the blackberries they ate as innocent kids were sweeter than the ones now, they are bittersweetly reminded that childhood is sweeter than their current age. Also, Heaney’s specific use of the word “wine” shows that the kids are now transitioning into adult life and are almost able to

drink wine, something many kids always want to do but are always denied by the adults because the society does not agree with kids drinking alcohol. Therefore, Heaney uses this metaphor to implement a bittersweet effect of blackberry picking. But he also uses similes to reveal negative experiences of blackberry picking. In line 14 to 15, he describes his jar of berries as “dark blobs burned / Like a plate of eyes.” Heaney specifically chooses to use eyes as a comparison because pubescent children see things in the world differently than they did before puberty; they are less naïve and more mature in their understanding of the world. “[A] plate of eyes” connotes a creepy feeling for readers as eyes are things that stare and disturb people, thus, with a plate berries with creepy eyes, Heaney uncovers a negative part of the berry picking experience. Heaney uses another simile to show another negative side of berry picking. In line 16, Heaney compares their palms with murderer Bluebeard’s, whose red and bloody hands. This simile that contains an allusion effectively makes the experience negative and uncomfortable, because it pushes readers into thinking that picking blackberries is like committing murders. Heaney chooses compare murder’s hands to those of the blackberry pickers, who really are kids undergoing puberty in the poem, because readers can imagine the sticky hands with blood, similar to kids’ sticky hands with semen and fluid after sex or masturbation, which are covert things kids do during and after puberty. This metaphorical contrast of violence to lusciousness shows how bummed it is for kids to come to this inevitable stage of life—adulthood. With the employment of metaphors and similes, the middle of the poem contains a shift in tone, from bittersweet to negative. This change of tone gives readers a disappointing feeling. Just like when kids hit puberty and grow into adulthood, they are disappointed that adulthood is not what they imagined. Therefore, Seamus Heaney uses metaphors and similes to reveal how terrible kids feel during puberty, and how hard it will be when they reach adult age.

Heaney uses imagery to further deepen the understanding of the blackberry picking and transition into adulthood for the readers. In line 8, he describes the cans that hold the berries “red ones inked up”. The visual imagery that Heaney employs gives readers a bloody scene, and describes what blackberry picking can be like—messy and disgusting. This bloody imagery disgusts what it feels like to be in a transition to adulthood; the transition is not as luscious like sex as kids think, but a rough time and just like a murder scene—bloody and messy. Not only is this imagery visual, but it is also organic because it gives the readers a feeling that readers can imagine going through. In line 15 to 16, he describes their hands as dirty and filthy because they are “peppered / With thorn pricks”. This tactile imagery gives an idea to the readers how unclean berry picking can be. Just like the previous imagery, this imagery shows the messiness of the transition to adulthood and is an organic imagery because it makes the readers feel a certain mood—discomfort. To both the berries and kids, they are growing and expanding in size. As previously mentioned from the previous paragraph, “wine” (6) gives adult readers imagination of drinking wine, and, thus, is an olfactory imagery; “a plate of eyes” (15) connote a creepy feeling, and, thus, this is a organic imagery; the comparison of Bluebeard’s hands in line 16, which lets readers imagine having bloody hands, is a tactile imagery. Thus, Heaney uses visual, olfactory, tactile, and organic imageries to let readers get a deeper knowledge of how messy blackberry picking and transition to adulthood are.

Finally, Heaney uses a certain form to deepen the experience of the blackberry picking for the readers. The poem has not a perfect rhyme scheme but a fixed approximate rhyme scheme of *aabbccddeeffgggg / ddhhddbb*, which changes the rhyme every couplet. The reason Heaney uses slant rhymes instead of perfect rhymes is because he wants to make the readers be disappointed in the sounds. Poem readers usually expect perfect rhymes, but

instead, in this poem, they read slant rhymes and are disappointed. By giving readers a disappointed feeling, Heaney shows reader what it feels for everyone that are excited to leave childhood and go into adulthood; adults are disappointed by their life, which is worse than their child life, that they expected to be well. The poem lacks the meter patterns, Heaney is trying to make the sound of the poem boring. Children's books usually have a meter to make the sound of the text upbeat and fun. But adults' books lack meters because those books are more serious, more informational, and less fun. The lack of meters shows that the children are transitioning into adulthood, when they read books that no longer have these fun and upbeat sounds. The lack of meters also shows that, after a while, blackberry picking is boring. Just like adult life, when people have to deal with bills, marriage, and work, is very boring compared to childhood, when everything is fun and fantasized. The poem has two stanzas; the first stanza had sixteen lines and the second stanza has eight. The reason Heaney cuts the length of the second stanza in half is because he wants to say that adult life feels faster than childhood life; the feel of time of the adult life is half of that of the child's. A child's expectation of being an adult is that everything will be great and better, instead time will feel faster and not the same as expected. This specific choice of stanza lengths further emphasizes how adults are disappointed by their childish expectations of being an adult. Therefore, Heaney uses a custom form to explain a boring experience of blackberry picking and a deceptive reality of being an adult.

Clearly, Heaney writes "Blackberry-Picking" by using metaphors and simile to show how bad kids feel during puberty and difficult adult life. He uses visual, tactile, olfactory, and organic imageries to reveal the messiness of the transformation of adulthood is, and how adults, soon after they finish puberty, are disappointed about adulthood because they used to think that adult life is better than childhood. And he also uses a specific form to say that

adults' lives are boring compared to children's lives and how adult life is a deception from expectations. Like picking blackberries, life starts sweet and fun, but then gets painful and boring. When one plan on picking blackberries, they are excited. But when they pick the berries, their clothes get dirty and hands get messy and thorny. Even though they are excited to eat their hard work, the berries taste sour and make them want to cry. The plan to go pick blackberries compares to the expectation to be adults when one is a child, the process of picking berries is puberty, and eating berries is compared to adult life. These chronological comparisons by Seamus Heaney perfectly show how people unfortunately feel during their major stages of life—from excited, to messy, to disappointed.